

Teachers Are Heroes – and Not Just for the Education They Provide

On the true importance of schools to society



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The pandemic has clarified the true importance of schools to society and shown us how teachers play a major role in protecting the rights of all our children. This article outlines the role of teachers and schools in upholding children's rights in Ireland and the importance of supporting them to do that by providing a strong counselling service to every school.

It is redundant to say that Covid-19 will change Ireland – that is a given. The most important questions to ask are, how will Ireland be changed, and what are the opportunities for improvement?

In the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO), we have covered a lot of bases since this pandemic took hold. We have interacted with the Department of Health on vaccines and waiting lists; we have liaised with officials on the proposed abolition of the Department of Children; and we have engaged with the Department of Justice on Direct Provision. But the most significant series of ongoing engagements we had was with the Department of Education.

I recently came across the quote: 'When nothing is certain, everything is possible.' To me, this really reflected the education landscape in Ireland as we begin to emerge from a worldwide pandemic that turned education in this country upside down. It reminds us that a crisis can create a fresh opportunity to improve and change those areas of weakness that we know are in our education system.

While we were all distracted by the pandemic, Ireland's population managed to break the 5 million mark for the first time since the Famine (RTÉ, 2021). As a nation, we need to pay heed to the demographics of that population. There were 60,000 babies born in Ireland in 2020, many with only their mother to greet them due to pandemic restrictions, and many who might have only met or been hugged by their wider family after nine or twelve months of living in isolation because of the lockdowns.

One of the major learnings that has to come out of this crisis is the recognition, by both the state and all of us as citizens, that schools provide so much more than just education.

We have come to recognise that schools have a role as safe havens for children at risk of abuse; as providers of warmth, support, and sustenance

for those who are poor and without a proper meal at home; and as a place where children learn to play, to socialise, to cooperate, and to understand themselves and their role in the world. None of that is measured in the 'Drumcondras', nor in the Junior or Leaving Certificate exams, and none of it is credited to the fantastic teachers and school leaders when their workload is considered.

In fact the opposite is true. I still vividly recall a response from the Department of Education, less than 10 years ago, about an investigation we did into a child being refused a place in more than 20 schools. We had claimed that the home tuition alternative offered to that child for two years deprived them of the opportunity to learn and enhance their social skills in line with other students. The Department was very clear that they had no role or responsibility in the provision or improvement of social skills and therefore could not be held accountable for their loss. I would like to think that such a letter would not be written now.

It has also become clear that teachers and school leaders provide two indispensable roles for society: as educators, and as human rights defenders. Indeed, I would agree with Prof. Áine Hyland when she said that 'schools should never again be closed and that teachers are essential workers' (O'Brien, 2021), because, in my opinion, they are one of the main active ingredients in fulfilling our State's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Most would agree that a teacher's primary role is to execute our nation's duty under Article 28: that 'children have the right to education no matter who they are: regardless of race, gender or disability; if they're in detention, or if they're a refugee' (OHCHR, 1989). Some may extend their understanding of a teacher's role to include upholding Article 29, which highlights 'that the education of the child shall be directed to, among other things, the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential'. I truly believe that this is the most important role that teachers play and that the pandemic has clarified this for so many in our society.

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The capacity of our children to reach their full potential without education and educators is, at best, severely curtailed, and at worst, impossible. We could see that in the children who went into the pandemic with disadvantages: those with a disability, those experiencing poverty or homelessness, those living in dysfunctional or abusive homes, and those with medical or mental health issues. Without the education system, children's development stalled or regressed. Society relies on our schools and teachers to make up for the disadvantages that we, as a nation, have not done enough to lift from so many of our children. That is a shameful fact that can no longer be denied.

The simplest metric to prove this point was the massive reduction in child protection referrals during the pandemic. The vast majority of this reduction can be accounted for by the absence of teachers in children's lives. As soon as schools returned, so too did the referrals – teachers are like guardian angels for so many of our children at risk.

Teachers and school leaders in communities affected by drug abuse and violence are being forced to act as watchdogs. I will always recall with horror, and no little admiration, hearing from one primary school principal about how they watched their students very closely from fifth class onwards for signs of extra spending or spare money, because they knew that every year, four or five children would be recruited to deliver and collect illegal drugs. This is thankless and often dangerous work for our educators, and we as a society do not recognise or support them enough for it.

The annual report 2020 from Women's Aid detailed a 43% increase in contacts with their services last year, compared with 2019 (O'Regan, 2021). Such violence has a huge impact on children in the family whether they are directly on the receiving end or are witnesses to it. Those children, again, often find refuge in their school, whether by focusing on their progress, by getting a listening ear from a trusted teacher, or, if they are lucky enough to have it available, by going directly for counselling.

All of this fantastic, altruistic work reinforces the vital role that teachers play in upholding the UNCRC. A child has the right to be protected from being hurt, neglected, or mistreated, in body or mind, and to receive help if they have experienced such harm (UNCRC, Articles 19 and 39). Children have the right to protection from harmful drugs and the drug trade (Article 33) and the right to be protected from sexual abuse (Article 34). Teachers protect and promote all of these rights every day – they are superheroes, and the ability to educate is only one of the many powers they possess.

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However, teachers cannot be asked to do all of this on our behalf unless they are properly supported in their efforts. There are many ways to provide this support. One of these would be to ensure access to an independent, qualified therapist as a certainty for all schools, across primary and secondary levels.

As things stand, with limited access to the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) for most schools, if a teacher recognises that a child is suffering from anxiety, bereavement, depression, an eating disorder, or challenging behaviour, they highlight it to the parent or carer and hope that they take their views on board and are willing and able to access public therapy or can afford private therapy. If the issues are seen to derive from the family setting, that leaves the teacher in a serious bind and with no way of helping the child, yet they still have to facilitate their education.

I am constantly reminded of my visit to schools in Finland, and I wonder why we cannot replicate their model. There, every school has access to its own nurse, social worker, and psychologist, and the huge benefits derived from this support were highlighted by the school leaders. Countries such as Germany, Belgium, Sweden, Slovenia, Estonia, and the Czech Republic also offer emotional counselling services in their schools (Downes, 2021).

I therefore believe that the state must step in and offer such services. If a child is able to address whatever issues are arising at the earliest opportunity, then the future will be a much happier and more optimistic

place for them. The unthinkable alternative is that we stick with the status quo, where children languish on 12–24-month waiting lists for primary care intervention, allowing issues to grow and worsen.

The percentage of students who contacted the Ombudsman for Children's Office in 2020 doubled as a result of the Leaving Certificate debacle (OCO, 2020). Every young person we spoke to referred to the mental health impact of the situation they faced. One said:

Students' voices have been completely ignored, and the mental health of students is going to suffer massively. I have already witnessed students all over Twitter and other social media platforms claiming that this decision will be the reason they take their lives. This is simply horrifying and frightening.

The latest OECD figures show that investment in education in Ireland as a percentage of national wealth languishes at the bottom end of the league table for wealthy countries (O'Brien, 2021). We need to recognise the value of what we do in this sphere rather than the cost of it. Those countries that provide more comprehensive emotional support in their schools understand that such spending saves much more in the fields of health (both physical and mental), social protection, and employment in the future.

We can no longer pay lip service to the teachers, education leaders, special needs assistants (SNAs), caretakers, and others in the school community who protect and uphold the rights of our children. Recognition should come with commitment: a commitment to provide the resources required to serve our children properly.

We stand at a crossroads in education, equipped for the journey with new wisdom and knowledge acquired over the past 18 months. The road behind is blocked – there is no going back there. But how do we go forward? We have seen what can be done. We have seen the energy and commitment that government can invest in education. This same energy must be applied to forging ahead to create a better environment for students and teachers, one where children can thrive and where teachers are recognised and supported to fulfil their roles as educators and rights defenders.

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